

Checking in on big business and social responsibility

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Body

Canadian filmmakers Jennifer Abbott, Mark Achbar and Joel Bakan showed corporations operate with a psychopathic streak in the powerfully unnerving 2003 documentary, "The Corporation."

Bakan and Abbott return with "The New Corporation: The Unfortunately Necessary Sequel," opening Friday following its September premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival.

It's a film that feels as timely as this week's newsfeed.

Using interviews with insiders, academics and experts, along with archived and behind-the-scenes footage, the filmmakers detail a lengthy list of depressing corporate behaviours and their devastating consequences, from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yet the documentary wraps with hope, showing the international rise of grassroots activism and demands for change and justice that are propelling tangible political shifts.

The filmmakers couldn't have known that Joe Biden would prevail in recent U.S. elections. But as teen Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg tells the UN's Climate Action Summit in footage of her now-familiar warning: "Change is coming, whether you like it or not."

Bakan and Abbott keep the documentary timely and that topical framework gives "The New Corporation" urgency that is occasionally lacking when it goes over familiar ground about the human, animal and climate cost of unchecked greed in the pursuit of profits.

The doc opens with a checkup on big business 17 years after "The Corporation" to find that corporations are still the globe's dominant institution, but have now found even more paths to effect and even control just about every aspect of our lives, including by donning do-good halos.

Both films are based on books by University of British Columbia law professor Bakan that are available, ironic as it seems, on Amazon.

"The Corporation" explored the notion that since the U.S. Supreme Court had determined corporations are persons under the law, what kind of people would they be? The short answer was nobody you'd want living next door you - remorseless, self-obsessed psychopaths.

"The New Corporation" finds the corporate world's self-interest streak remains robustly unchecked. With a reach that now extends to every part of our lives, corporations have added a new manoeuvre, insisting shareholders are no longer their sole concern. It's a new age, they claim, one of people before profits.

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Using a playbook checklist framing device, which isn't as effective as the first film's list of dysfunctional personality traits, the filmmakers make the case for why there's no such thing as corporate social responsibility and that virtue-signalling corporations have no interest beyond the bottom line.

No surprise that even as they claimed to be people-first businesses, rampant deregulation was allowing big companies to push for-profit privatization of everything from health care to drinking water, exacting deep cuts to costs and corners at the expense of human and animal well-being, as well as the planet's health.

At the same time, soon-to-be-former U.S. President Donald Trump exempted the biggest corporate earners from paying taxes that once funded social programs while going on a deregulation spree.

And while there are corporate altruists, it's hard to do good when shareholders begin to clamour.

Narrated by Toronto filmmaker Charles Officer with the right mix of approachability and gravitas, "The New Corporation" will be slightly easier to watch since the results of the U.S. election, but no less disturbing.

The New Corporation: The Unfortunately Necessary Sequel

(out of 4)

Directed by Jennifer Abbott and Joel Bakan. Opens Friday at select theatres including Landmark Whitby. 106 minutes

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